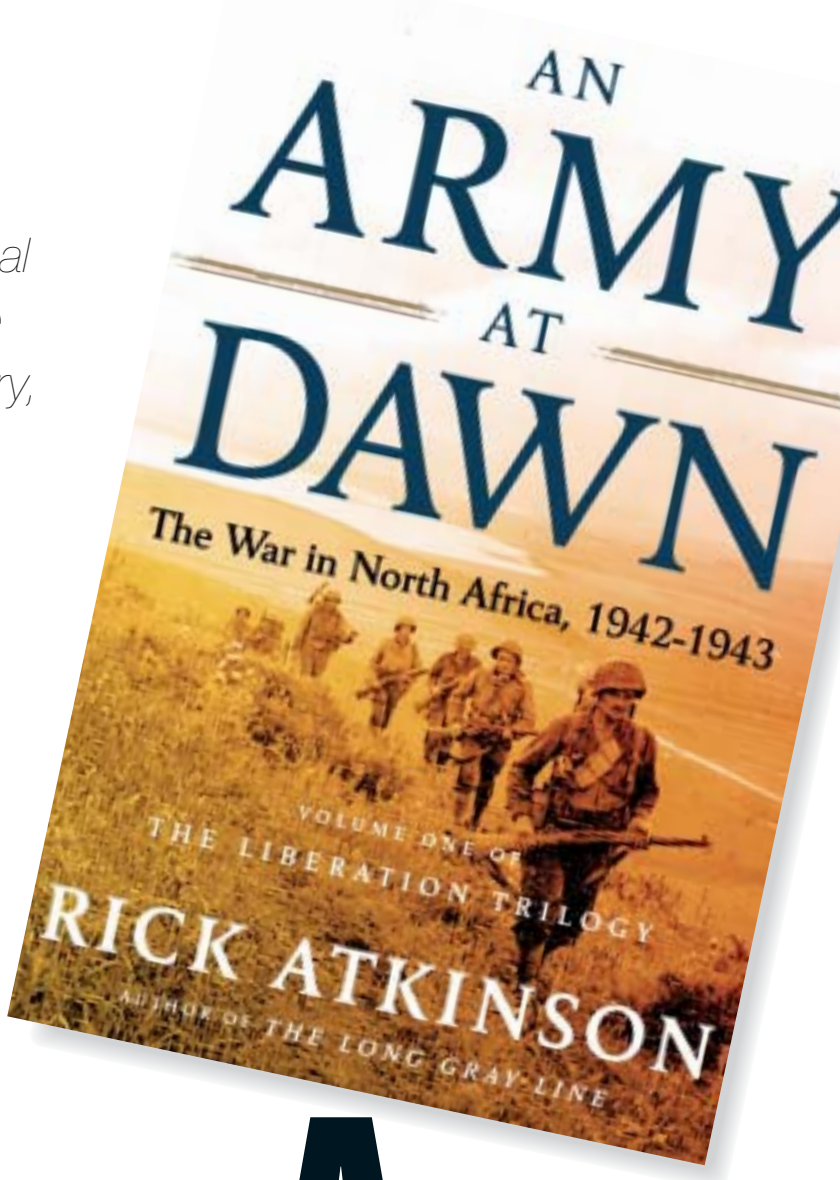
This is the first in a planned series of occasional interviews with authors whose works spotlight the Army's history, culture and operations.



THE Dawn OF THE Modern Army

Interview by Steve Harding

FEW civilian journalists have spent as much time around the Army as Rick Atkinson has, and fewer still understand the service's history and culture as well as the veteran reporter and bestselling author does.

The son of a career Army officer, Atkinson was born in Munich and grew up on Army posts in Europe and the United States. He won the 1982 Pulitzer Prize for national reporting for his series of articles in the Kansas City Times on the West Point Class of 1966, which formed the basis for his best-selling book "The Long Gray Line: The American Journey of West Point's Class of 1966." His coverage of Operation Desert Storm formed the basis for his equally popular "Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War."

Now on leave from his position as assistant managing editor at the Washington Post, Atkinson has embarked on what he considers his most ambitious project, a three-volume history of the U.S. Army's World War II crusade against Nazi Germany. The first volume, "An Army at Dawn," covers the war in North Africa in 1942 and 1943 and is to be published this month by Henry Holt and Co.


Rick Atkinson

Q What was the genesis of this trilogy?

A Stories of World War II and the Army's role in it were part of my upbringing. Growing up on Army posts, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, World War II wasn't history, it was a very real and current thing. There were many combat veterans still in the Army, and it was part of the lore of the institution.

This project actually began in about 1994, when I was the Berlin bureau chief for the Washington Post. Living in Europe at that time I was able to experience many of the 50th anniversary commemorations of the war.

And being able to visit the sites and cover the events really helped me realize that WWII and the liberation of Europe were the greatest stories of the 20th century. I also realized that much of the American public's interest in the war has been focused mainly on the period from the Normandy landings to the end of the war. But I don't believe you can understand what happened at Normandy and afterward unless you understand what came before.

While looking for a format in which to tell the story, it occurred to me that the story of the war in Europe could be pretty neatly broken into three pieces, and that each of the pieces informed the other.

I began work on the book in earnest while I was still in Europe. I came back to Washington in 1996 and kept reading and working on the book, making myself into something of an historian. Then the publisher Henry Holt expressed interest in my concept of a trilogy, so in January 1999 I took leave from the Post and began working on the project full-time.

Q Why is the North African campaign important in the larger history of the Army's WWII operations?

A North Africa was a testing ground in which the American Army was able to explore its own capabilities and flaws, and then apply the lessons learned to later, larger battles.

You have to remember that there wasn't a single general officer in the U.S. Army in 1942 who'd held a position as high as division commander in World War I, so even those who'd had substantial combat experience in that war hadn't had substantial command experience. So, the relatively low-intensity combat American units experienced in North Africa was precisely the kind of introduction to modern warfare that the Army needed at the time.

Probably the greatest gift the North African campaign gave the U.S. Army was that it prevented us from making a premature attempt to invade France. I believe that if we had tried an invasion in 1942 or 1943, it would have been a catastrophe, with enormous casualties. There was the opportunity in North Africa to work out a lot of kinks in terms of training, operations, logistics and the development of combat leaders.

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The second volume of Rick Atkinson's WWII trilogy is due out in 2006, and the third in 2009.

Ranger CPLs Robert Bevin and Earl Drost were among the soldiers who engaged French troops during the initial landings.

Q It seems that this first volume focuses quite a bit on the characters of individual commanders and soldiers, and on the interactions among them.

A Yes, it does, because I'm interested in personalities and the interplay of personalities.

I believe that war is a great revealer of character — the stresses of command and the stresses of daily combat really strip away pretension. That's the essence of the story I'm trying to tell. Who are these men? How do they evolve as the campaign progresses? What makes some succeed, and others fail? And what role did those early successes and failures play in shaping the Army's actions later in the war?

Q This is a huge chunk of history to bite off. It's a tremendous range of source material, and it would seem that the charting of the course through the project was probably one of the most difficult parts of the job.

A Yes, it is a huge project. I had the good fortune that North Africa, at least, is something you can "get your arms around." There were only four Army divisions involved, and they were really interesting units peopled by very interesting characters.

North Africa wasn't the sort of enormous industrial enterprise that the war later became. And that allowed me as a fledgling historian to learn my craft, to learn where the documents are, and understand the relationships between documents here in the U.S. and those overseas.

Q Did you find the various Army centers of historical research to be useful in the writing of this first volume?

A The Army history program has been tremendously helpful. If you're willing to work your way through the file cabinets and all the material that's available, the Army's history centers are an amazing repository of great material — including many unpublished historical studies of the Army's various activities in World War II.

I spend a lot of time at the Center of Military History in Washington and the Military History Institute at Carlisle Barracks in Pennsylvania. And every time I've visited I've gotten wonderful cooperation and assistance.

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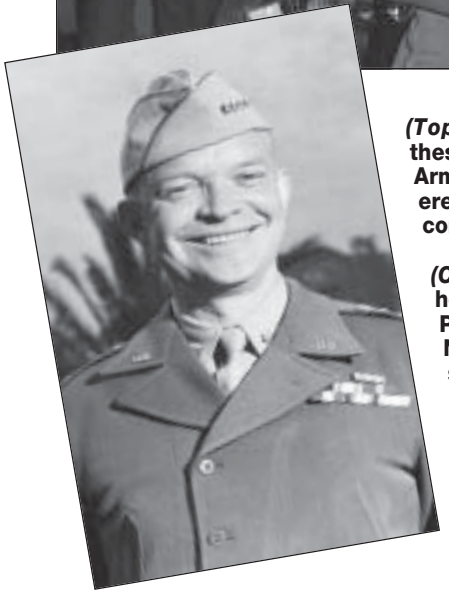

(Top) **American tank crews, like these men from 2nd Battalion, 13th Armored Regiment, quickly discovered their vehicles' weaknesses in comparison to German tanks.**

(Center) **GEN Dwight D. Eisenhower pins a third star on George Patton — one of the stars of the North African campaign — shortly after Patton took command of II Corps in Tunisia in March 1943.**

(Left) **Eisenhower, seen here in Algeria in April 1943, later commanded allied forces in the 1944 Normandy landings.**

Q Have you been able to draw any conclusions about the ways in which WWII may have influenced the development of today's 21st-century Army?

A The Army is a living thing, and it has a personality that evolves and grows as a human's would. And WWII was tremendously important to the Army's development.

You see in the Army that comes out of North Africa and goes to fight in Sicily and Italy the genesis of today's Army. You see the handing of responsibility to junior officers, and the ruthless sorting out of competent and incompetent leaders. You don't often get a second chance to excel as a combat leader in today's Army, and that started in WWII — if you couldn't cut it as a combat commander the very first time you faced the enemy, you were out. And you rarely got a second chance.

The whole notion that a commander has a sacred responsibility for his soldiers' well-being also developed in WWII and remains part of the Army's credo today. The relationships in today's Army between officers and NCOs is one of the great strengths of the Army, and you can see it evolve during WWII.

A soldier's dedication to the man on either side of him and the willingness to sacrifice for a comrade are vital in any army. And I believe that spirit, which developed in the Army in WWII, is still present today. That soldier ethic is an important and sacred thing, and I think it needs to be more fully understood and appreciated by American civilians.

And, finally, this book points out that if you're going to fight a global war, whether against the Nazis or against international terrorism, you must have allies. You must be able to get along with those allies and you must understand that different armies do things differently. Any incapacity to do that, or the belief that we can go it alone, is a recipe for failure. □